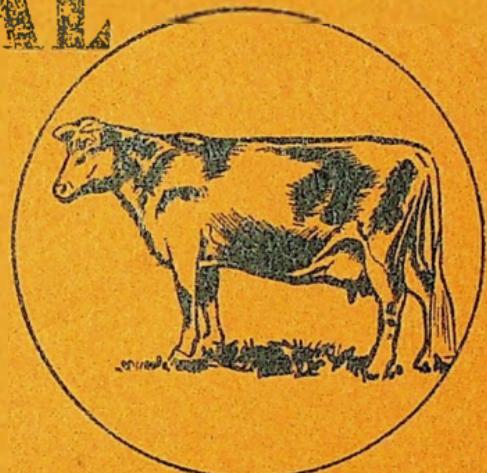


LIBERAL



AGRICULTURAL



POLICY

LIBERAL REPORT ON AGRICULTURE

*This Report, drawn up by
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in consultation with other experts, has been
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LIBERAL REPORT ON AGRICULTURE

OBJECTS

Liberals seek to achieve two objects by their Agricultural Policy :—

1. Agriculture can make a greater contribution to solving the country's economic difficulties by providing more home grown food.
2. Those who work in Agriculture should enjoy a standard of living equal to that of the rest of the community.

BRITAIN AND WORLD FOOD SHORTAGE

The more difficult our import problems are becoming the more important it is to grow as much of our own foods as possible. The over-all aim of our policy therefore is increased productivity in agriculture no less than in industry. Everything possible must be done to make better use of our resources and to promote the expansion of our agriculture.

Self-sufficiency can, of course, never be aimed at. With a population of over 50 million our total agricultural land is just over 45 million acres, nearly one third of which consists of rough grazing. This leaves an area of about 0.6 acres of cultivated land per head of the population, whereas the minimum for the provision of an adequate diet has been estimated at $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres per head.

Moreover, as an industrial country, we are dependent on exports and on the maintenance of large-scale international trade. We cannot afford to disregard the interests of friendly communities, both within the Commonwealth and outside, whose economy largely depends on the export of agricultural commodities.

While, therefore, some part of our food supply will have to be imported from abroad, we shall have to increase home production in view both of our adverse balance of payments and of a world situation in which the increase of populations by far outruns the food supply. Between 1939 and 1949 the world population increased by 10 per cent, at the rate of

20 million a year, while during the same period the production of wheat and rye increased by only 2 per cent and that of rice actually decreased by 5 per cent. European food production per head of population was only at 73 per cent. of its pre-war level in 1948. Even before the war, in 1938, it had been estimated that two-thirds of the world's population were inadequately fed.

The expansion of British agriculture is therefore not only in our own but in the world's interest. It can only be achieved by more intensive methods of cultivation and improved distribution.

British agriculture must put its main emphasis on the production of those commodities which can be grown more economically here than in other countries and which yield the highest monetary and nutritional values ; that is, chiefly, livestock and its products, vegetables and fruit. These are the commodities for which our climatic and geographical conditions are best suited and also for which the proximity to the market offers a natural advantage.

The Liberal Party recognises that the development of British agriculture required the security provided by guaranteed and assured markets. Such prices would be adjusted in accordance with costs incurred in production and the needs of consumers. This procedure, already familiar to farmers in the annual price reviews in February, should fix "ceiling" as well as "floor" prices, and provide at least a year's notice of any downward variations. Such a system provides an insurance against temporary fluctuations or a sudden collapse in markets. Given this basis for confidence, the industry can proceed by further capital investment to increase production and reduce costs.

CAPITAL INVESTMENT

If the present Government's target is achieved, this country will in 1952 produce 50 per cent. of its own food. This means, in other words, that, in spite of all scientific and technical progress it will feed about as many people as a century ago when the country with 25 million people was practically self-supporting although, admittedly, on a lower nutritional level.

Although British farming has become highly mechanised in the last decade, there is still room for a great increase in labour saving machinery of all sorts. This is true of almost all types of agricultural production and all sizes of holdings. Total production can be increased and at the same time costs reduced by these means. Land reclamation, drainage and long term land improvement can also contribute to increased production, but under the circumstances existing today major schemes of capital development may have to be curtailed.

Too much reliance has been placed in the past on improvised methods of ad hoc assistance instead of a long-term development policy which would be of lasting benefit to agriculture. At present not quite 5 per cent. of our total capital investment is spent on agriculture and forestry, compared with 15 per cent. for Fuel and Power, 22 per cent. on other industries and 26 per cent. on Transport and Communications. A much larger expenditure will be necessary to modernise our agriculture and increase the output per man-hour in this vital industry. No final limit can be set to the extent to which British Agriculture can contribute to the country's needs, provided the right conditions for such expansion exist.

An Agricultural and Horticultural Bank should be formed to provide ample cheap capital and credit to help the farmer and smallholder expand his production.

The assistance that agriculture requires to expand production should be increasingly given in such a way as to help to reduce costs by increased mechanisation, by high yields from crops and livestock, by more labour saving buildings, and generally by modernising the industry in every way. Although we now have a highly mechanised agriculture, there is still far more to be done to get the full value of mechanisation. But the cost of modern machinery is so high that assistance must be forthcoming if we are to reap the full benefits of mechanisation quickly.

LAND RECLAMATION

Land reclamation and the mechanisation of agriculture are among the most essential and valuable capital investments

at the moment. Millions of acres of marsh and other "marginal" land which are now wasted could be reclaimed by drainage, ploughing up and fertilising. A more generous use of the Hill Farming Act and more capital investment on drainage and mechanisation would help to restore fertility to land which neglect in the past has allowed to decline.

More imaginative projects should be planned as more workers become available, in particular in connection with the hydro-electric schemes of the Highlands and the reclamation of river estuaries. In the Wash, for instance, 150,000 acres of fertile land could be reclaimed by a scheme on the lines of the Dutch Zuider Dam, which involves building a 12 mile dam between Lincolnshire and Norfolk. It could accommodate 3,000 farmers on family holdings of 50 acres a piece.

LAND PRESERVATION

Available agricultural land is constantly being reduced by the needs of housing and other building, the working of open cast coal, forestry, the War Departments' requirements, the improvement of roads and for many other purposes. One object of the Town and Country Planning Act was to prevent the wasteful use of land. With a greater appreciation of the seriousness of the permanent loss of productive land to food production, the provisions of this Act should be fully used to safeguard agriculture.

HOUSING

No form of increased production is possible without increased numbers of houses, and the vigorous improvement of existing houses, and the amenities which are taken for granted in urban areas. More and better houses are the first essential to carrying out an agricultural policy. Lack of adequate dwellings has been a chief contributor to the labour problems of the countryside. The building programme of rural housing must be pushed forward with increased vigour. The number of new houses is completely out of proportion with the increased labour force on the land. The wartime expedient of "gang-labour" still carried on into peace, is unsatisfactory

to the worker and employer, is a heavy cost to the tax-payer and cannot be more than a temporary solution.

The objections to the system of "tied cottages" would be removed if the shortage of houses no longer existed. Moreover an increase in the number of houses available would also reduce the number of houses which both in the interest of workers and employers, would need to be so "tied".

AMENITIES

Basic human needs are the same in the country as in the town. The rural population today wants, and has a right, to share in the comforts of modern civilisation. This desire has been frustrated in the past not only by obstacles set by Nature but also by man-made difficulties such as the neglect of the countryside between the wars. The results of that neglect are still visible today.

The most pressing need in the country is that of piped water supplies, sewerage and electricity. It has to be met without delay. Of the existing farmhouses, 47 per cent. are without piped water. The proportion of agricultural workers' cottages in the same position is even greater. Local authorities are unable to cope with a responsibility for providing water and drainage on a national scale. To bring immediate relief and as a first step in a wider plan the Ministry of Health should, wherever possible, give greater assistance to local authorities to provide small-scale water supply schemes.

The Liberal Party opposes both the nationalisation of road transport and the system of licensing by Traffic Commissioners. Better service to the public in rural areas would be provided by leaving the roads free and protecting the public and the small operator from those who would like to gain a monopoly of road transport.

All possible means will have to be used to reduce the disparity between rural and urban standards of life.

SMALL HOLDINGS

Small holdings should receive every encouragement possible and should be made a means of settling more people on the land. The agricultural and horticultural worker should

be assisted to become the owner of his holding. Recruitment ought not to be restricted to farm workers, as at present proposed by the Government, but should be open to newcomers with the necessary abilities and inclinations who are prepared to undergo an apprenticeship. Training facilities for new entrants should be provided.

In order to assist small farmers, co-operative associations for effective marketing, for buying and for joint use of machinery, should receive the greatest possible encouragement. The record of the Land Settlement Association shows their vital importance for the small independent farmer, and how successful in providing a good living such small holding schemes can be.

The dispossession of successful farmers in favour of small holding schemes, envisaged under the present Agricultural Act, should not be allowed, but land should be purchased when it becomes vacant.

FARMER'S CO-OPERATIVES

Co-operative schemes, not only for smallholders, but for farmers generally, should get all possible support and should be expanded to provide more services, including not only marketing, grading, processing and storage of farm produce, but the supply of machinery (combine-harvesters, grass-dryers, tractors, etc.), artificial insemination, and small water-supply schemes.

CONTRACTORS

The Liberal Party also recognises that the enterprise of both large and small contractors can help agriculture in the ever increasing need for greater mechanisation.

At present the County Agricultural Committees continue to operate their war-time machinery departments, hiring out machinery to farmers. The cost to the tax payer is considerable. The Liberal Party believes that this is a service that can be provided more economically by the enterprise of private contractors, and that such contractors should be encouraged to do so. The County Committees should cease to carry on this form of state trading.

INDUSTRIES IN RURAL TOWNS

Industries in rural towns should be encouraged in the interest both of the decentralisation of industries and of the greater prosperity and wider choice of employment on the countryside. The development of industries would assist in the provision of essential services for rural districts. By shifting greater emphasis on to the production of consumption goods it would contribute towards a better balance of the economic structure, thereby making the countryside less susceptible to economic fluctuations.

MINISTRY OF NUTRITION

At present the interests of producers are represented in the Government by the Minister of Agriculture, and those of consumers by the Minister of Food. This division gives rise to difficulties. There is insufficient co-ordination between the Ministries of Food and Agriculture. The Liberal Party would therefore merge the Ministries of Food and Agriculture under one Minister of Cabinet rank, who would be solely responsible to Parliament in all matters relating to food production and distribution.

BULK PURCHASE

Bulk buying of food by the Ministry of Food under long-term contracts will have to be continued in order to stabilise the prices of staple food, to assure their sufficient supply and to help Commonwealth countries to plan increased production. A great deal of centralised buying, however, is done on a short-term basis, and all of this should be discontinued because these contracts do not exclude the fluctuations of prices on the world market nor do they offer security and thereby an incentive for the producer. They do not guarantee supplies at a reasonable and fixed price for the consumer and are, therefore, not a means of keeping down the cost of living. Moreover, the government buyer who appears on a competitive market is likely to drive prices up and to buy on stiffer conditions than the private trader.

FEEDING STUFFS

Feeding stuffs are of vital importance to livestock production, which must remain the main interest of British agriculture. It provided three-quarters of the total value of agricultural output before the war: and in spite of war-time reductions is still providing 60 per cent. It is the branch of farming which is not only best suited for our climate and which can look back on a high tradition of quality production, but which also offers the biggest scope for saving dollars.

Part of our supply of feeding stuffs will always have to be imported, but now that the subsidies are being removed, the heavy cost of these imports makes it abundantly clear how important it is to produce as large as possible a quantity of animal feeding stuffs at home. But increased imports would assure quick returns in the provision of home grown meat, in particular work.

Poultry farming is also very dependent upon imported feedings stuffs. Between the wars egg production, developed by the enterprise of thousands of individuals, became a major branch of British agriculture. In spite of great difficulties the quick recovery which poultry farming has made since the war shows how much it can contribute to improving the standard of nutrition, providing its raw materials, feeding stuffs, can be obtained.

High as the cost of imported feeding stuffs is, it is cheaper to import them, than to buy the finished article abroad. The time has now come when the derationing of animal feeding stuffs can be started. In any case rationing on the basis of pre-war qualifications is out of date and restricts enterprise.

We must grow as much feedings stuffs as possible by maintaining our arable acreages, in order to reduce our dependence on imports, which cannot be relied upon, and which may become even more difficult to obtain. The home production of feeding stuffs can also be stepped up by improved methods of grass drying and silage making and by the reclamation of "marginal" land.

FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

The present system of distributing vegetables and fruit is

very unsatisfactory. There are enormous differences between the prices the producer gets for his goods and those the consumer has to pay for them. During seasonal gluts it is sometimes not worth the producer's while to harvest because the price he gets for his vegetables and fruit hardly covers his expenses for wages, while at the same time the consumer has to continue to pay high prices.

The Liberal Party will encourage regional marketing schemes as one means of improving this situation. Such schemes should be voluntary and should aim at reducing the distributive costs between grower and consumer.

Quick freezing and processing plants should be developed in order to avoid seasonal waste and provide a round-the-year supply of perishable products at steady prices.

CONCLUSION

British agriculture has a vital part to play in the post-war economic life of the country. There is much lee-way to make up. Work which should have been done between the wars will have to be done now at higher costs.

Provided the standard of living for those who are engaged in agriculture is equal to that of the rest of the community, the men who are needed to increase food production can be found. The standard of living must include an adequate number of houses of a standard not less than prevails in towns, and including the amenities of water, sanitation, electricity, etc.

The agricultural community are not yet fully confident that their occupation is accepted on full terms of equality with industry. Provided this confidence is created by constructive policy, the response of those in the industry will be assured.

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